DEVOTED DEFENDER

David Taylor, the dean of General College who battled its closing in 1996, again is fighting publicly and hopes to save the college.

BY PAUL TOSTO
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David Taylor remembers a guidance counselor at St. Paul Central High School telling him that, seemed like a capable student, the University of Minnesota would be too tough for him.

Taylor didn't buy it. He went on to succeed at the university's College of Liberal Arts and later at

The General College dean hears echoes of that counselor's voice in the present discussions ab best if his college closes and why its students, who often enter the university with low entrance- marginal high-school rankings, would be better off in community colleges or spread throughout

Taylor's not buying it. He instead is fighting his bosses publicly, as he did in 1996 when Gener on the chopping block. He won then. But as the regents meet Friday to examine President Rob plan to close the college as part of a university overhaul, Taylor might not have the power this ti

He thinks otherwise. Taylor, 60, a man of slight build who speaks in soft, measured sentences, the calm voice of defiance.

A St. Paul native, he calls the current fight "a classic Minnesota struggle" in which people take s repeat their positions but don't actually slug it out face to face.

Here it is at its core. Two university panels, made up largely of administrators, came up with rec in late March intended to help the university reach its goal of being among the world's top three research institutions.

They knew they'd get a fight over General College, which for nearly 75 years has kept a door op prepared students, offering an intensive focus on English, writing and math so the students — r students of color from the Twin Cities — can transfer to other colleges at the university. In 1996 President Nils Hasselmo tried to phase out the college as part of a plan to raise academic stanc arguments similar to Bruininks'.
The strongest argument: Less than 10 percent of the students who start in General College graduate from the university in four years, a rate officials say is unacceptable.

General College supporters say graduation rates are a university-wide problem, and that other colleges haven't done enough to keep students on track after they transfer from General College. They argue the university will maintain its ethnic and racial diversity if General College becomes a department of the College of Education. They see closing General College as a sign that university leaders are more concerned with serving Minnesotans than with sustaining the university's international reputations.

Taylor says he supports many recommendations in Bruininks' report to remake the university, but closing General College "needs more gestation." He says the administration effectively shut him out of the process and is seeking input only as a means to their end.

"I felt like Gulliver in Gulliver's Travels," Taylor said. "I was just nailed down."

University officials say Taylor was treated like every other dean in the process.

"The fact of the matter is, as controversial as this issue is, any notion of changing General College has met with resistance. We knew that," said Robert Jones, a senior vice president at the university and a member of the academic task force. "It was pointless to create an environment where we couldn't have ideas on the table."

But Jones said he was against closing General College in 1996.

"I told the administration last time that I thought it was a bad idea," he said. The difference, he said, is that the 1996 plan closed General College while the plan he supports now is "transforming it into an academic department. No one has presented a compelling argument why it can't carry out its mission as a department."

The administration has strong backing among political and business leaders. Jones also says that organizations for minorities is not as one-sided in favor of General College as Taylor believes.

Taylor, though, points to a long list of individuals and groups who backed him in a full-page newspaper advertisement in April. He also points to student sit-ins, rallies and campouts in support of General College — something that wasn't evident in the same way in 1996. He also has strong support among religious groups, including the Catholic and Jewish churches.

"It's kind of a no-brainer," said the Rev. Steve Haptonstahl, interim rector of St. Philips Episcopal Church. "You don't have to back up to listen. You're drawn in."

Even as the regents prepare Friday to review the recommendations, Taylor says it's not over.

"One would assume this is a done deal. You have a resolute president. He seems to imply he has it in his pocket," Taylor said. "My sense is that it's going to be a very close call."

WHAT'S NEXT

• University regents will review university President Robert Bruininks' plan Friday.

• A rally to save General College is set for Friday at noon on campus.

• Regents hold a public forum 10 a.m. Monday on the sixth floor of the McNamara Alumni Building.

• Regents are expected to vote on the plan June 10.

• To find pertinent university documents, go to www.umn.edu and type "strategic positioning plan."
search engine.

• General College supporters are fighting its closure. Read the responses of General College le www.gen.umn.edu.

OTHER PARTS OF PLAN

The package of changes will help make the university one of the top three public research instit world, proponents say. Other provisions include:

• Closing the College of Human Ecology and moving its programs to other colleges;

• A new College of Design that would include the current College of Architecture;

• A campus honors program;

• A new emphasis on writing at the undergraduate level.

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